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ABSTRACT

This digest offers guidelines to help teachers prepare students with disabilities to succeed on state and district writing assessments. Teachers are urged to use the three principles of effective writing instruction: (1) use a basic framework of planning, writing, and revision; (2) instruct students in steps of the writing process and the features and conventions of the writing genre; and (3) provide feedback guided by the information explicitly taught. One methodology that follows these principles, Self-Regulated Strategy Development, is explained in terms of goals, the sequence of instruction, and methods of individualization. Teachers are also urged to prepare students for assessment (a mnemonic writing strategy called PLAN and WRITE is briefly described); to use assistive technology in instruction and testing (including software for transcription, planning, and communication); and to provide test accommodations, such as extending time limits, dictating to a scribe, or using pencil grips. (DB)

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By

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Helping Students with Disabilities Succeed in State and District Writing Assessments

Cynthia Warger

While writing poses significant challenges for many students with disabilities, good teaching can help them overcome these barriers. The writing of students with disabilities typically contains more mechanical errors than that of their nondisabled peers and is less polished, expansive, coherent, and effective. Difficulties may exist because students with disabilities tend to

- Know less than their peers about the characteristics of good writing.
- Begin writing with little or no planning.
- Limit revisions to minor corrections.
- Have problems with transcription processes (e.g., spelling, handwriting, punctuation).

To help students with disabilities perform at their best on writing assessments, teachers can use the following techniques:

- Use the three principles of effective writing instruction.
- Prepare students to participate in writing assessments.
- Use assistive technology in instruction and testing.
- Provide students with appropriate accommodations during testing and ensure that the accommodations correspond to those used during instruction.

Use the Three Principles of Effective Writing Instruction

Research shows that students with disabilities can be taught to write and to write better. This conclusion was borne out in a meta-analysis of research on teaching expressive writing to students with learning disabilities (Gersten, Baker & Edwards, 1999). *[Meta-analysis is a way of quantitatively analyzing the results of many studies on a single topic in order to obtain an overall picture of research results on the topic.]* Virtually all the interventions analyzed were multifaceted and involved students writing every day. Three principles were identified as being critical to effective writing instruction:

- Using a basic framework of planning, writing, and revision.
- Instructing students in steps of the writing process and the features and conventions of the writing genre.
- Providing feedback guided by the information explicitly taught.

One of many interventions that follow these principles is Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD). Although researchers Karen Harris and Steve Graham designed SRSD for students with learning disabilities and other severe learning difficulties, students in general education also have been found to benefit. With SRSD, students are explicitly taught writing strategies and self-regulation procedures (e.g., goal-setting, self-monitoring, self-instruction, and self-reinforcement).

The goals of the SRSD approach are to

- Assist students in mastering the cognitive processes of planning, producing, revising, and editing written language.
- Help students further develop the capability to monitor and manage their own writing.
- Aid students in developing positive attitudes about writing and about themselves as writers.

Because many students have developed negative attitudes about their ability to write, teachers address student attitudes first. They help students understand that while writing does require effort, making the effort to learn and use the strategy will enable them to write. Then teachers follow a sequence to introduce and integrate the strategy and self-regulation components of SRSD:

- Teacher and students work together to develop student background knowledge and pre-skills needed to learn the strategy.
- Teacher and students discuss the strategy. This includes providing the rationale for the strategy, explaining each step, and pointing out mnemonics. For example, on an opinion essay, students may plan what to say using the TREE strategy—**T**opic sentence, note **R**easons, **E**xamine reasons, and note **E**nding. Self-regulation is built into the strategy. Students learn when to use the strategy.
- Teacher models the self-regulated use of the strategy as much as needed by individual students.
- Students memorize the strategy, then employ the strategy and self-regulation procedures as they compose. Teachers provide as much support as needed.
- Students transition to independent performance.

SRSD is not a pre-packaged model. It can be individualized for students and should be regarded as part of a total writing program.

Harris and Graham offer suggestions for teachers using SRSD:

- Start with one strategy and take it slowly. Let students progress at their own pace. Do not plan to teach a strategy in a set period of time.
- Offer encouragement. Point to evidence that shows students are writing better.
- Be flexible—e.g., some students may need more modeling or more explicit goal setting than others.
- Post strategy charts to aid students' memories.

- Ask students what is working and not working.

More than 20 empirical studies have shown that SRSD helps students become better writers.

Prepare Students for Assessments

All students, but particularly those with disabilities, need to have teachers explain the writing task clearly and fully. A rating scale and example essays are not sufficient. Having a strategy to use when prompted to write an essay helps students feel comfortable and enables them to do their best.

In one study (De La Paz et al., 2000), the writing strategy PLAN and WRITE was used to prepare students for a state assessment. This expository writing strategy is as follows:

PLAN—**P**ay attention to the prompt; **L**ist main ideas; **A**dd supporting ideas; **N**umber your ideas.

WRITE—**W**ork from your plan to develop your thesis statement; **R**emember your goals; **I**nclude transition words; **T**ry to use different kinds of sentences; use **E**xciting, interesting, $100,000 words.

The mnemonics of PLAN and WRITE remind students of the strategy steps, to plan before starting to write, and to reflect on the qualities of good writing while composing. Positive results were found for students with learning disabilities as well as low-, average-, and high-achieving writers.

Use Assistive Technology in Instruction and Testing

Within a strong writing program, technology can provide many different types of accommodation to help students overcome challenges related to their disabilities. Research is identifying potential roles for these new technologies, such as easing the physical processes involved in writing, helping to manage planning and revising processes, and supporting social interaction and communication. Promising technologies are

- Software for transcription and sentence generation (e.g., spelling checker, speech synthesis, word prediction, and grammar and style checkers).
- Applications for cognitive and planning processes (e.g., prompting programs, outlining and semantic mapping software).
- Computer networks for collaboration and communication.

For example, students with writing disabilities might use speech recognition technology for dictation. For students with learning disabilities in the upper elementary and middle school grades, dictated compositions are substantially longer and qualitatively superior to compositions written by hand or word processor. MacArthur and Cavalier (1996) found that students with learning disabilities produced better essays when dictating to either scribes or speech recognition systems than when they wrote by hand.

Despite the benefits, speech recognition systems place specific demands on students. Users must be trained to speak clearly without extraneous sounds, pronounce punctuation, and correct errors, all of which may interfere with their ability to compose.

Teachers can avoid difficulties by making sure that students

- Understand the limitations of the tool.
- Want to use the tool.
- Have sufficient training in using the tool.

Provide Test Accommodations

Assessment accommodations are alterations in the way a test is administered or the way a student provides responses that are designed to redress the student's disability. Appropriate accommodations do not provide an unfair advantage.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams make decisions about which accommodations and test modifications are appropriate for a student. Types of accommodation include changes in the time allocated for the test, when or where the test is given, presentation of the test (how the assignments are given), and how the student responds.

Accommodations for writing should address the student's particular need. For example, if a student writes very slowly due to a physical disability, accommodations may entail extended time, dictating to a scribe, or using assistive technology. Pencil grips, taping the test paper onto the desk to prevent it from moving, or replacing the answer booklet with wider-lined paper may be appropriate accommodations for a student who has difficulty with handwriting.

In general, no testing accommodation should be recommended for a student unless that student has had an opportunity to use it during instruction. Ideally, to be fair to the student and to get the best measure of proficiency, instructional accommodations and test-taking accommodations should correspond.

Resources

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MacArthur, C. (1996). Using technology to enhance the writing processes of students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 29*(4), 344-354.

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For more information, see ERIC EC Digest E590, *Teaching Expressive Writing to Students with Learning Disabilities*
http://ericec.org/digests/e590.html

National Center on Educational Outcomes,
http://www.coled.umn.edu/NCEO (for information on large-scale testing and accommodations)

Center on Accelerating Student Learning, http://www.vanderbilt.edu/CASL

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